

Inference to the Best Explanation and Rejecting the Resurrection

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Abstract: Christian apologists, like Willian Lane Craig and Stephen T. Davis, argue that belief in Jesus' resurrection is reasonable because it provides the best explanation of the available evidence. In this article, I refute that thesis. To do so, I lay out how the logic of inference to the best explanation (IBE) operates, including what good explanations must be and do by definition, and then apply IBE to the issue at hand. Multiple explanations—including (what I will call) The Resurrection Hypothesis, The Lie Hypothesis, The Coma Hypothesis, The Imposter Hypothesis, and The Legend Hypothesis—will be considered. While I will not attempt to rank them all from worst to best, what I will reveal is how and why The Legend Hypothesis is unquestionably the best explanation, and The Resurrection Hypothesis is undeniably the worst. Consequently, not only is Craig and Davis' conclusion mistaken, but belief in the literal resurrection of Jesus is irrational. In presenting this argument, I do not take myself to be breaking new ground; Robert Cavin and Carlos Colombetti have already presented a Bayesian refutation of Craig and Davis' arguments. But I do take myself to be presenting an argument that the average person (and philosopher) can follow. It is my goal for the average person (and philosopher) to be able to clearly understand how and why the hypothesis "God supernaturally raised Jesus from the dead" fails utterly as an explanation of the evidence that Christian apologist cite for Jesus' resurrection.

Keywords: Inference to the Best Explanation, Jesus' Resurrection. The SEARCH Method, The Legend Hypothesis, Willian Lane Craig, Stephen T. Davis, Robert Cavin and Carlos Colombetti, Abduction.

William Lane Craig has argued that it is rational to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead because the hypothesis that such an event happened provides the best explanation of the available evidence (e.g., the biblical witness and the martyrdom of the apostles).¹ According to Craig, if you consider what an explanation must do—the criteria it should meet—the resurrection hypothesis meets them better than its naturalistic

¹ See Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence* and also Craig, *Reasonable Faith*.

competitors. Robert Cavin and Carlos Colombetti, however, very skillfully refuted his argument by revealing, not only the problems with Craig's criteria and his criteria-based approach, but also how the resurrection hypothesis actually fails to meet the criteria Craig proposed.²

Later, in the pages of this very journal, Stephen T. Davis tried to defend Craig's argument,³ but Cavin and Colombetti (again, in this journal) not only refuted his argument as well, but fully explained why the resurrection hypothesis cannot be the best explanation.⁴ The standard model of physics "entails that God never supernaturally intervenes in the affairs of the universe that lie within its scope,"⁵ and thus the resurrection hypothesis is necessarily implausible and has low explanatory power. They even go on to give a rigorous Bayesian analysis of why the Legend hypothesis—the idea that "the New Testament Easter traditions that relate group appearances of the Risen Jesus did not originate on the basis of eyewitness testimony but arose, rather, as legend"⁶—is a much better explanation of the available evidence than the resurrection hypothesis.

Their argument is devastating for those who claim to believe in the resurrection because it is the best explanation of the evidence. From start to finish, however, the debate between Craig, Davis, and Cavin and Colombetti is difficult to follow—most definitely for the lay person, and even for some professional philosophers. Not everyone is familiar with the relevant nuances of inference to the best explanation and philosophy of science, and Bayesian analysis can go over the head of even analytically trained philosophers. It is the goal of this essay, therefore, to explain in more easily understandable terms why the resurrection hypothesis cannot be the best explanation for the evidence that those like Craig and Davis offer in its favor. To do so, I am going to use a method of reasoning, a version of inference to the best explanation, I teach to college students every semester—one popularized by Ted Schick and Lewis Vaughn in their textbook "How To Think About Weird Things." They call it the SEARCH method. I will explain the criteria it utilizes and how the method

² Cavin and Colombetti, "Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis," 205–28.

³ Davis, "Craig on the Resurrection," 28–35.

⁴ Cavin and Colombetti, "The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis," 37–94.

⁵ Cavin and Colombetti, "The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis," 67.

⁶ Cavin and Colombetti, "The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis," 85–86.

supernatural assumptions that are contrary to the laws of science and are thus, by definition, non-simple, unconservative, and cannot have scope. Indeed, Theodore Schick has argued that “God did it” can never be an adequate explanation of anything,⁶⁶ and I have argued that the same is true for “a miracle occurred.”⁶⁷ Since the resurrection would have been a miracle caused by God, it is no wonder that it fails so monumentally at being a good explanation.

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identified by a Christian philosopher, William of Ockham). These criteria work across the board and are consistently utilized in IBE.

⁶⁶ Schick, “Can God Explain Anything?” 55–63.

⁶⁷ Johnson, “Justified Belief in Miracles is Impossible,” 61–74.

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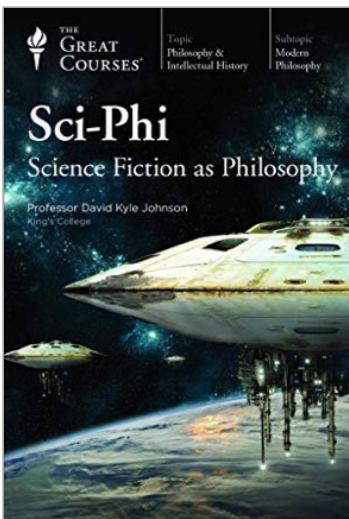
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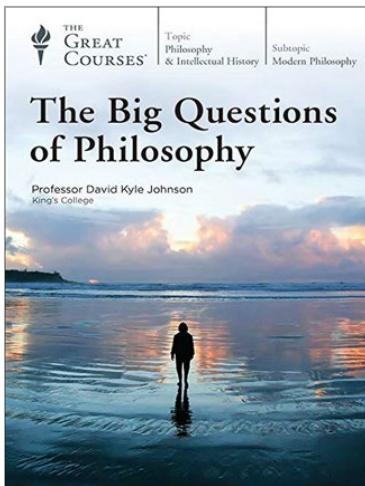
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Kyle would like to thank his student aide, Sabrina Traver, for her herculean formatting, typesetting, and proofreading efforts. The debt she is owed cannot be calculated. He would also like to thank Darren Slade, and the anonymous reviewers of earlier versions of this paper.

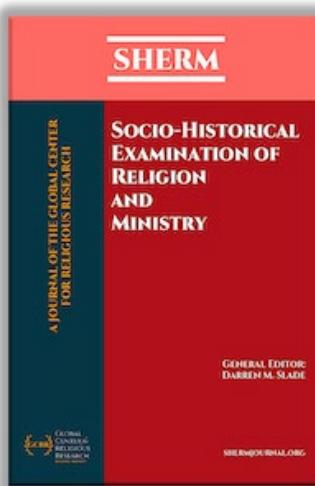
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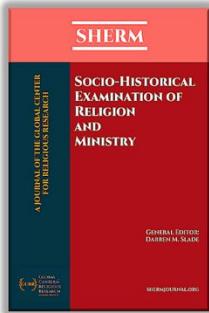


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